

VZCZCXRO5822
PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHAH #0681/01 1501135
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 291135Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0891
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3826
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1644
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1511
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2080
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000681

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, ECA, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/29/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EPET](#) [SCUL](#) [AF](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: FOREIGN MINISTER TO BOUCHER:
TURKMENISTAN WANTS TO IMPROVE HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES

REF: ASHGABAT 668

Classified By: CDA Richard E. Hoagland for reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a May 28 meeting with Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher, Turkmenistan's Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov welcomed broader cooperation in the education sector, especially in exchange programs. He did not rule out implementation of a new "Bolashak"-type scholarship program, but stressed that Turkmenistan must shape such a program in its own way. Meredov told Boucher that his country is eager to help Afghanistan, including through some transportation infrastructure programs and by providing cheap electrical power. On human rights issues, Meredov said that Turkmenistan wants to improve its human rights practices. However, it cannot accredit Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalists, who have no professional experience. While acknowledging that the 2006 death of journalist Ogulsapar Muradova had created problems for Turkmenistan, he gave no indication that Turkmenistan is willing to reopen the case. Likewise, he rejected the suggestion that the two men arrested with Muradova were human rights victims. Stating that Turkmenistan is willing to work with any non-government organization on a constructive basis, he was unenthusiastic about meeting with Human Rights Watch, which he had found in a previous meeting to be difficult to talk to -- "like talking to a brick wall." Meredov briefly discussed regional water use issues, stating that the Central Asian countries should resolve the issues themselves. He also had a brief pull-aside with Boucher on Azerbaijan and onshore licensing for foreign oil companies. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov met May 28 to discuss bilateral relations and regional issues. Following a discussion about Turkmenistan's efforts to improve its mass media and Internet access, Boucher reminded Meredov that some Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) sites and the American Corner in Turkmenbashi City still need approval to reopen. He stressed that the United States expects new, very positive cooperation with the Supreme Council for Science and Technology in expanding Internet access. Agreeing that the cooperation with the Council was promising, the head of the Americas Desk, Serdar Bashimov, told the Assistant Secretary that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had sent the Embassy a

diplomatic note expressing support for the new program on May 127.

WE WILL CONSIDER BOLASHEK OPTION, BUT DO IT OUR OWN WAY

13. (C) Boucher asked how the United States and Turkmenistan should follow up on the discussion he had earlier that day with President Berdimuhamedov. Meredov assessed the meeting as being "very good" and "constructive," and said the president had been very happy with the results. There are a number of areas where cooperation has been good, especially in education, and educational exchanges have taken place at all levels. There need to be more exchanges, Meredov said, especially of university students and teachers. There is also a need to facilitate Fulbright and Muskie exchanges -- and to look at ways of broadening the participation of participants in society once they return to Turkmenistan -- as well as to expand university linkages, a priority that Berdimuhamedov had set after visiting the United States in September 2007. Turkmenistan's first step towards that end is its effort to begin restoring its relationship with Texas A&M, and to explore new possibilities with Columbia University.

14. (C) Stressing that the United States will help in every possible way, Boucher recommended that Turkmenistan establish its own scholarship program along the lines of Kazakhstan's "Bolashak" program. Such a program would allow Turkmenistan to address some of the areas where the country most needs additional expertise. Responding that Bolashak is appropriate for Kazakhstan's experience, Meredov said that

ASHGABAT 00000681 002 OF 004

his country will think about the option. Turkmenistan needs to find its own format for such a program, but is willing to work with the United States toward that end.

TURKMENISTAN WANTS TO HELP AFGHANISTAN

15. (C) Boucher asked whether Turkmenistan is experiencing problems with narcotics smuggling and terrorists along its border with Afghanistan. Responding firmly that "We control our borders," Meredov acknowledged that his country faces a problem with narcotics smuggling, but added that Turkmenistan's law enforcement organs successfully interdict the drugs. He noted the need to change the socio-economic conditions, adding, "We're trying to help Afghanistan." The president has implemented initiatives to improve the transportation infrastructure, including the building of a railroad from Atamurat to Imam Nazar on the Afghanistan border. Meredov suggested that Turkmenistan might extend that spur five kilometers into Afghanistan, in order to create a trucking terminal that eventually could be connected with the Ring Road. Turkmenistan also has initiatives to provide cheap electrical power to Afghanistan, as well as cooperation in the oil and gas sector. Meredov confirmed that he would attend the Afghanistan Donors Conference in Paris.

16. (C) Noting that Boucher knows Afghanistan well, Meredov reminded the Assistant Secretary that there are many ethnic Turkmen living in Northern Afghanistan. While there has been no real problem with instability in the areas populated by ethnic Turkmen, Turkmenistan nonetheless fortifies its side if it hears of possible insurgents in the area.

RADIO LIBERTY JOURNALISTS HAVE NO EXPERIENCE

17. (C) Boucher referred to the human rights paper that the Charge passed to Meredov May 27 (reftel), stating that it offers opportunities, not just complaints. In addition, Radio Liberty journalists seem still to be having problems. Also, questions regarding Ogulsapar Muradova's death remain prominent. Boucher asked whether these journalists can be given regular status. Meredov stressed that Turkmenistan has already accredited journalists from about 20 foreign news

agencies, some of whom live in Ashgabat. Turkmenistan only refuses to accredit journalists from those agencies where there are questions regarding their work. Noting that the main goal of all news agencies is to collect and disseminate news, he said such activities must nonetheless be carried out according to Turkmenistan's laws. Noting that the Embassy has already requested that Radio Liberty reporters be accredited, Meredov also added that those journalists have no professional experience. For example, one in Mary is a driver, while another is a farmer. "It doesn't work that way. People should do the jobs they are trained to do."

AMANKLICHEV AND HAJIYEV ARE NOT VICTIMS

18. (C) Regarding Amanklichev and Hajiyeve, the two individuals arrested along with Muradova two years ago, neither are journalists. Hajiyeve has a previous criminal record for a serious crime. Although he had been given a long prison term the first time he was convicted, he had served only a few months of that term before he was pardoned by the former president. Nobody harassed him after he was released. Amanklichev, too, spent several months in prison before he was pardoned, and the two first met in prison. When Amanklichev was released, he worked as a private taxi driver. But both men were doing "dark deeds" -- law enforcement officials found ammunition and weapons when they were searched in connection with the "French spyglass case," in which a French embassy official was photographed turning over glasses with a camera to Hajiyeve and Amanklichev.

MEREDOV ACKNOWLEDGES MURADOVA CASE HAS CREATED PROBLEMS

19. (C) Meredov acknowledged that Muradova died, stating that there are "all sorts of false tales about her death." He

ASHGABAT 00000681 003 OF 004

noted that Embassy personnel had seen Muradova's corpse following her death, and "they were aware of the marks on her body. They made sure there were no inflicted marks." He added that there had been a lot of discussion about the need for a forensic examination. A coroner had carried out an autopsy, and a copy of that report had been given to Muradova's family. However, he acknowledged that all three cases have created an "unhealthy environment" for Turkmenistan.

WE NEED CONSTRUCTIVENESS FROM HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS

110. (C) Boucher raised the possibility of a visit to Turkmenistan by Human Rights Watch. Boucher told Meredov that after his meeting at the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (septel), he was struck by how little people know about how much is going on in Turkmenistan. Inviting Human Rights Watch could offer an opportunity to make this point. Meredov stressed that his country is open to working with all those who are willing to have a constructive relationship with Turkmenistan, but he has not noticed any desire on Human Rights Watch's part to cooperate. He noted that he met with Human Rights Watch in 1996 and 1997, while he was still working at the parliament, but he found talking to them was difficult -- "like talking to a brick wall." Also in the late 1990's, the then-director of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights went to London to talk with Amnesty International and other human rights organizations. The organizations' approach, Meredov claimed, had been "very aggressive."

111. (C) Meredov stressed that Turkmenistan is not afraid of human rights organizations, even though they have "thrown much dirt on us." Turkmenistan is prepared to work with a constructive approach, and there is much that is good being done. Meredov said that the president had promised early in the year to strengthen support for human rights but, Meredov added, "we need time, and we need to do this gradually." The Assistant Secretary reiterated that a meeting with Human Rights Watch might be an opportunity, acknowledged that

reform can not happen immediately, and promised, "We'll work with you."

MEREDOV: WE'VE ALREADY TAKEN MANY STEPS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

¶12. (C) Meredov stressed again that Turkmenistan already has taken many practical steps, including the pardoning in August 2007 of 11 prisoners, many of whom had been imprisoned for alleged complicity in the 2002 attack on former President Niyazov's motorcade. Among those individuals was the former Grand Mufti of Turkmenistan. In addition, some on a U.S. list of individuals not allowed to travel have been permitted to depart Turkmenistan (i.e., Maral Yklymova), and two religious groups that the United States had asked be registered have been allowed to do so. Finally, an organization of FLEX alumni has been told that it can register.

"WE MUST SOLVE REGIONAL ISSUES OURSELVES"

¶13. (C) The Assistant Secretary noted Turkmenistan's offer to host this year's Central Asian Trade and Investment Framework Agreement council meeting, though the meeting will be held in Dushanbe, and asked how the Central Asian countries might be able to reach agreement on how best to use water. Joking that he never sidesteps straightforward questions, Meredov responded that the problem should be resolved by the Central Asian countries themselves, and on a basis of mutual respect. He recounted how, when questions came up between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on how to use the waters of the Amu Darya River (which flows through both countries), Presidents Karimov and Niyazov signed an agreement that allows both countries to split the waters. As one of the terms of that agreement, Uzbekistan built six pump stations on Turkmenistan's land. In addition, the two countries jointly operate a water reservoir. Likewise, Turkmenistan also has signed an agreement with Iran to share

ASHGABAT 00000681 004 OF 004

the water of the Tejen River. The two have built a water reservoir which holds up to 1.25 billion cubic meters of water, enough to irrigate 250,000 hectares of land on each side of the border. He emphasized, "We need to find a solution ourselves, without the assistance of the World Bank," though he welcomed the assistance of the World Bank.

PULL-ASIDE ON AZERBAIJAN AND ONSHORE LICENSING

¶14. (C) The meeting concluded with a one-on-one pull-aside between Meredov and Boucher in which the two further discussed the issue of Azerbaijan that Boucher had raised with President Berdimuhamedov and the issue of onshore licensing for foreign oil companies.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: Meredov's pointed comments on the human rights issues Assistant Secretary Boucher raised demonstrates the new government's continued sensitivity on human rights issues even when, as was the case with Muradova, those abuses occurred under Niyazov. And, at least as far as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is concerned, the government still has a long way to go in understanding the concept of a free and open media. But the many steps that Turkmenistan is taking to address its shortcomings in human rights areas -- which Meredov alluded to and the Director of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights discussed in detail (septel) -- and his plea for constructive engagement on human rights issues demonstrate that the government is aware that it has much to do and wants to get on with the job, rather than to dwell on the past. END COMMENT.

¶16. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher cleared this cable.
HOAGLAND